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New York

Chairman: Mr. Nkgowe . . . . . (Botswana)

The meeting was called to order at 10.20 a.m.

Agenda item 83

Rationalization of the work and reform of the agenda of the First Committee

The Chairman: The issue of rationalization of the work of the General Assembly has been dealt with by the Special Committee on the Rationalization of the Procedures and Organization of the General Assembly for several years. Since 1984 discussions on the rationalization process of the work of the First Committee have become part and parcel of the exercise aimed at enhancing the overall effectiveness of the General Assembly and its main bodies, as well as the Conference on Disarmament and the Disarmament Commission.

A number of Chairmen of the First Committee have made every effort to deal with relevant issues concerning rationalization by rearranging the agenda and improving the Committee's organization of work for its efficient functioning.

Among these efforts, as the Committee will recall, were innovations introduced by Ambassador Tom Eric Vraalsen at the thirty-eighth session of the General Assembly, Ambassador Celso de Souza e Silva at the thirty-ninth session (A/C.1/39/9); Ambassador Douglas Roche at the forty-third session (A/C.1/43/9); and Ambassador Pratap Rana at the forty-fifth session (A/C.1/45/10). These proposals are well known to representatives since many of them have already been implemented by the Committee.

Right from the outset, a two-track approach was adopted for the reform of the First Committee — one targeting the substantive and the other the procedural aspects of the issue. Nevertheless, Member States almost immediately recognized that although there was little room for change with respect to the procedural area, a strategic opportunity existed with respect to the substantive changes, especially with regard to re-examining the agenda. However, very soon it became clear that the attempt to streamline the agenda of the First Committee was encountering political and conceptual difficulties. At the same time, the introduction of procedural changes proved to be more feasible.

Thus, at the forty-sixth session the First Committee held a combined general debate on disarmament and international security agenda items, with the understanding that the reform should not undermine, in any way, the priority given to disarmament issues.

At its 1993 special session the First Committee issued a paper (A/C.1/47/15) on the rearrangement of agenda items, with thematic clustering, which was submitted to the Committee by the representative of Denmark on behalf of the European Community and its member States.

As Member States will recall, this paper became a basis for General Assembly resolution 48/87, by which the Assembly, among other things, further adopted a thematic approach to cluster items into 10 broad topics: nuclear weapons; other weapons of mass destruction; conventional weapons; regional disarmament and security; confidence-building measures, including transparency in armaments; outer space — disarmament aspects; disarmament

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machinery; other disarmament measures; international security; and related matters of disarmament and international security. The consideration of disarmament issues, including an informal structured discussion on the subjects and action on the draft resolutions, followed this clustering in 1994, 1995 and 1996, and will be continued this year.

Let me remind delegations that in 1994 the Chairman of the First Committee circulated a working paper (A/C.1/48/9) with a view to providing a framework for a comprehensive approach to all items on the agenda of the First Committee. The paper encouraged the Committee to further discuss the question of the practical integration of disarmament and international security issues. As a result of extensive consultations, disarmament and international security issues have been considered since 1994 in an integrated manner by the First Committee throughout all three stages: the general debate; the structured discussion; and consideration and action on those items.

Moreover, as a result of discussions in the Special Committee, the General Assembly recommended consideration of the possibility of biennializing and triennializing some items on the agenda of the Main Committees. In accordance with this recommendation, the First Committee took a decision to move some items on its agenda to two-, three- or even four-year cycles — for example, "The role of science and technology in the context of international security and disarmament", "New types of weapons of mass destruction and new systems of such weapons"; "Question of Antarctica"; "Disarmament Week"; "Disarmament Information Programme"; and "Verification in all its aspects".

Furthermore, in complying with the recommendation of the Special Committee of the General Assembly concerning the possibility of merging within a single title or incorporating as sub-items issues that are closely related in substance, the First Committee has decided to merge "Reduction of military budgets" and "Objective information on military matters" under one agenda item, entitled "Reduction of military budgets". The Committee also merged two items on the subject of security assurances into one item with an agreed title and one resolution. It was also decided that the Committee would further continue to look into the possibility of merging similar items at future sessions of the Assembly.

This brief recapitulation of the rationalization issue clearly demonstrates that a lot has been accomplished by the First Committee in the course of the past years. However, analysis proves that these accomplishments are somewhat lopsided, as the biggest changes fall on procedural aspects, while the substantive part is almost untouched.

The reason for a relatively slow pace of reform of the substantive agenda of the First Committee lies in the divergence of political and security interests of different countries, groups of countries and even regions and subregions. For example, it seems that broad consensus exists that the present disarmament machinery — the First Committee, the United Nations Disarmament Commission and the Conference on Disarmament — while adequate, allows for further rationalization of each of these bodies, and better coordination between them, in order to avoid duplication. However, there is no agreement on ways and means of achieving these lofty goals. Moreover, a number of countries for the first time at this session questioned the usefulness of structured discussions in the way we have known them for the last three years. Some countries, speaking on behalf of a sizeable number of delegations, have suggested that it was time either to abolish the structured discussions as such or to use them for consideration of the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings of disarmament.

Here, let me suggest that should the Committee resolve that this phase of work is no longer useful, as was the case in past years, a decision should be taken to abolish it. However, it should be agreed from the outset that the meetings allocated to this particular phase of work would not be lost, but rather made available for in-depth consideration and open-ended consultations on draft resolutions.

Theoretically speaking, Member States could adopt more drastic and innovative approaches, and display a higher degree of readiness to tackle the vital areas of national security interests. We could achieve this in many ways, but we should definitely start by formulating an international disarmament agenda so that it is focused on attainable goals.

A number of questions arise with regard to the rationalization of the work of the First Committee. For example, could we agree not to put forward draft resolutions that have been around for decades? Could we possibly refrain from submitting year after year the same text of draft resolutions that do not seem to take into consideration the real changes taking place in the world's disarmament and security environment? Should we not contemplate turning routine or procedural resolutions, some

of which are biennialized or triennialized, into decisions of the First Committee proposed by the Chairman in consultation with Member States?

Furthermore, why not consider informally discussing the agenda for each upcoming session? On the basis of agreed priorities, we could then recommend not more than 10 items for detailed consideration at the following session.

Of course, the above-mentioned ideas on the rationalization of the agenda of the First Committee would require the courageous efforts of Member States to materialize. Moreover, any changes would be subject to agreement within the framework of the overall reform of the General Assembly.

With these few remarks, I invite members of the Committee to comment on this item.

Mr. Millim (Luxembourg) (*interpretation from French*): I have the honour to speak on behalf of the European Union. Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Cyprus have aligned themselves with this statement. Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway also associate themselves with it.

During the general debate, we promised to return to the question of the rationalization of the work of the First Committee. Allow me to set out our views on this key question.

The European Union attaches great importance to the First Committee's discussion of the rationalization of its work. We hope that the conclusions reached will yield an operational result in the form of a resolution adopted by consensus. However, we would like to stress that the Secretary-General's programme for reform is not, as such, a subject for this Committee to discuss.

Following a decision by the General Assembly, the reform programme is considered directly in the plenary under the chairmanship of the President of the General Assembly, who has specifically asked Committees to ensure that they do not duplicate his work.

The European Union will therefore limit its comments to the question that is currently on the agenda of the First Committee, that is, the rationalization of its methods of work. The European Union urges Member States to refrain from trespassing on the proper domain of the General Assembly, so that the Secretary-General's proposals can be examined in a coherent and integrated manner.

The General Assembly's First Committee should give all Member States the opportunity to express their views through debates, resolutions, and votes. Its work should also allow us all to follow closely the evolution of States' positions, take into account their different preoccupations and priorities, and work to achieve as much of an alignment of their diverse points of view as is possible.

Broadly speaking, the First Committee is achieving these objectives. However, the resources of both the Secretariat and the delegations could be used more efficiently. Debates could be better organized. They could also be more focused. And they could produce better results. In particular, they could yield texts that are more accessible and user-friendly, not only for the benefit of national delegations, but also for the public, journalists and members of non-governmental organizations.

Given these objectives, we should consider organizing our work and debates in the First Committee differently. At the moment, the proceedings consist of a general debate, a thematic debate and finally a consideration of draft resolutions. Experience in recent years has demonstrated that this sequence is not entirely satisfactory. In practice, delegations want to express their views when they are given the opportunity to do so, and they generally repeat the same familiar arguments in all three phases. In our opinion, this benefits no one.

The general debate remains, in our view, an important opportunity for delegations to set out formally and fully their national positions. It should continue to be held at the outset of the First Committee's work. Experience has shown that up to 10 meetings are needed in order to give all delegations the opportunity to express their views. However, it would certainly help us all, in drafting our respective resolutions, if the views of all delegations were known as early as possible. We would thus propose that in the future the Secretariat schedule both morning and afternoon meetings for the general debate during the first week of the First Committee's work.

The thematic debate was initially proposed by the European Union, in an effort to promote more focused and interactive discussion. It might have proved useful had delegations been prepared to speak only very briefly in the general debate and to refrain from making further statements when draft resolutions were presented and examined. But it is clear that this initiative has not

succeeded. We should, therefore, not hesitate to acknowledge its failure and bring the experiment to an end.

In the light of the above, we wish to propose that the First Committee's work begin with the traditional general debate, followed by the presentation and consideration of draft resolutions, grouped by topic. The thematic debate should be merged with the presentation and examination of draft resolutions. The consideration of drafts already takes place — and successfully, in our view — according to the subject matter "clusters" set out in paragraph 2 of General Assembly resolution 48/87, rather than according to the order in which they appear on the agenda. This would provide ample opportunity for delegations to make further comments, in addition to those already made in the general debate, and would help to give structure and focus to the Committee's work.

We would also propose that the First Committee's agenda be rationalized. The present agenda is the result of successive additions. It does not follow any logical pattern. The result is both difficult to manage and difficult to understand.

The agenda should therefore be reorganized. We could reclassify existing items by taking a simple and logical thematic approach, one that we have already adopted both in the debate on individual items and in the submission and consideration of draft resolutions. We have some specific proposals to offer in this regard, which we are circulating informally with this statement as a contribution to our discussion here. Broadly speaking, we are proposing that some items and sub-items be reallocated in a more coherent and logical manner. For example, we would suggest a single item combining all the draft resolutions on nuclear-weapon-free zones, another on regional approaches to international security or yet another on small arms. Were that approach to be adopted, the Secretariat would than have to assign each of those items and sub-items a new number on the agenda.

Should such a change be adopted, the First Committee would be able to proceed next year simply by working its way through the agenda and would no longer need to have recourse to the complex manipulations it has been forced to adopt in recent years. In our opinion, this approach would considerably simplify our proceedings.

As for the recurrence of draft resolutions, the great majority of items are assigned to the First Committee's agenda every year notwithstanding the fact that neither current events nor ongoing discussions justify their inclusion. This practice has consequences for all of us; it makes the agenda cumbersome and limits the consideration of items on which a productive discussion could be fruitful. In this connection, all delegations need to exercise greater self-restraint. In our opinion, some items should not be discussed almost mechanically on a yearly basis. Mere repetition, in our view, adds nothing. However, only a change of attitude on the part of all delegations will enable us to achieve our objectives. In fact, a certain number of countries have already made laudable efforts in this connection. We must however go much further, drawing on experience and on the results obtained by other Committees on this question.

Agreement might be sought among groups to settle on the principle that the majority of agenda items be considered only every two or even three years, rather than every year as is now the case. We should not, of course, be dogmatic. It goes without saying that if there are major developments in a particular sphere, the item should be reinstated in the agenda for that year without any problem. We see three advantages in this proposal: first, there would be savings on administration and energy; secondly, the discussions each year could focus on a smaller number of items; and, thirdly, requests for reports from the Secretary-General would be less frequent. In our opinion, such reports are often of limited impact and entail considerable costs for the United Nations.

Obviously, however, these substantial improvements cannot be achieved unless all delegations are prepared, collectively, to make meaningful efforts to try to work out a balanced approach to the various items on the agenda. We know that the importance attached to those items can vary according to delegations' perceptions of them. We recognize that creating such a balanced approach, in which each would make a contribution, will not be easy. However, we believe that we should embark on this project now. We are proposing that the First Committee endorse in principle the approach we have just suggested and that the Chairman or one of the Vice-Chairmen undertake to hold informal consultations during the coming year so that we might reach agreement on a consolidated plan for next year's session of the First Committee.

In conclusion, every delegation in this chamber has an understandable interest in making our work more productive and in using the limited time and resources available to us as efficiently as possible. Let me be clear: this matter must not become politicized. On the contrary, we hope that a consensus approach will emerge from this discussion, in the interests of all of us. The European

Union is offering these ideas in the hope that we may all join forces in formulating a brief, technical draft resolution that will enable us, by consensus, to chart a course that can improve the Committee's operations. I would conclude by saying that I believe that we can all agree that our work is too important to be squandered.

Mr. Yamaguchi (Japan): I should like to speak briefly about the rationalization of the work of the First Committee. I recall the view expressed in the structured or thematic debate last week by the Ambassador of Pakistan on four useful functions of the First Committee, and I thank him for providing a good conceptual basis for our discussion today.

Japan has been aspiring to contribute to the disarmament efforts of the international community and has taken a modest pride in its contribution to the cause of disarmament and non-proliferation. A part of Japan's efforts had been made in the First Committee's deliberations, consultations and actions. To express in a different way an aspect of the four functions defined by the Ambassador of Pakistan, certainly the First Committee has been instrumental in forming world public opinion on disarmament by testing the ground for concrete disarmament measures, giving directions in which we could proceed and indicating how far we could press.

Two cases in point are the draft resolutions on nuclear disarmament and on small arms that we are promoting. Few could have imagined a situation four years ago in which a draft resolution emphasizing that nuclear weapons must ultimately be eliminated would be accepted by 160 countries, including nuclear-weapon States, thus setting an objective that the community of nations should strive for.

In this year's general debate, 45 countries, by my count, spoke about small arms. Many of them welcomed the report of the Panel of Governmental Experts on Small Arms. Many countries, including my own, are aware of the difficulties inherent in the small-arms issue. But the substantial level of interest manifested in the First Committee's deliberations at least warrants a continued pursuit of the issue of the possible disarmament challenge. These examples illustrate useful functions of the First Committee.

This does not mean that there is no room for rationalization. Concerning the structured or thematic debate, I believe that on a conceptual level there are good reasons for reserving some days for the delegations to engage in a theme-structured framework. But just last week we witnessed many empty seats and very few delegations taking the floor. Those who assembled were dismissed after half an hour. If this is a kind of rationalization of the First Committee imposed spontaneously and collectively, why not formalize it by simply reducing, if not eliminating, the number of days reserved for the structured debate, so that we can move on to the actions a little more swiftly.

One possible argument against shortening or eliminating the period for the structured debate could be that delegations make use of the one-week period during the course of the debate for informal, bilateral or small-group consultations. But to my mind, that is tantamount to the tail wagging the dog. A more rational schedule could introduce better discipline in the activities of the delegations without creating inconvenience for them.

Some delegations could argue, as the previous speaker has, for a more drastic approach to the rationalization, and our delegation is more than open-minded — in fact, we are tempted to join them. But let us suggest, as a small but concrete step, that the time slot for the structured debate either be eliminated or at least be reduced. This could be done initially by coupling the structured debate with the introduction of draft resolutions, as was suggested by the previous speaker.

I wish to emphasize that our suggestions should in no way be interpreted as calling into question our appreciation of the work of the First Committee itself. The First Committee is dear to us, as is the cause of disarmament.

Mr. Čalovski (the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia): I welcome, Sir, your analytical and informative introductory statement. I was happy to hear your advanced opinions, and I am sure that your statement will help the Committee to decide on the best way of discharging its duty and rationalize its work.

The views of my delegation are in general agreement with the position stated by the representative of Luxembourg on behalf of the European Union. But, as a contribution to the ongoing discussion on this important subject, I would like to express some opinions regarding our future deliberations.

My delegation is in favour of the following arrangement for the work of the First Committee in the future. First, once a year the First Committee should hold a general debate on all aspects of international security and a separate general debate on all questions of disarmament and arms regulation. Secondly, the Committee should

discuss its agenda items at the regular session and also at its resumed sessions. Thirdly, as a rule, after completing discussions on an item, the Committee should discuss and adopt the decision or resolution on the subject. It is important to avoid lengthy preambular paragraphs. Fourthly, if the Committee does work at a resumed session, there is no need for the Commission on Disarmament. Fifthly, it is advisable to merge the First Committee with the Special Political and Decolonization Committee (Fourth Committee). Sixthly, the resumed sessions of the reformed First Committee — I underline the word "reformed" — should take place all year round, as with the Fifth Committee.

The above arrangement will enable all Member States to participate credibly and on a continuous basis in the deliberations on the political agenda of the United Nations, on questions concerning the maintenance of international peace and security, and on all aspects of the disarmament agenda, as well as on the items on arms regulation. The proposed new arrangement would mean a very important strengthening of the role of the General Assembly, in accordance with Article 11 of the Charter.

Mr. Moher (Canada): I'll speak very briefly this morning. There is an old expression in English that goes: "If it ain't broke, don't fix it". Far be it from Canada to suggest that the First Committee is broke, but it certainly is bent, and it needs to be reformed. We do not believe that we, collectively, are making focused and cost-effective use of our time and resources.

We think that all of us should reflect very carefully on the agenda and the work programme on which we are currently engaged. My delegation has done so, and there is a paper on the side table this morning that sets out some of our reflections as a result of our own assessment.

We have listened carefully to the comments made here this morning. We welcome the comments that you, Sir, have made. We think many of the rhetorical questions you have put are very appropriate, and we share the implied conclusions that you have set out. We also welcome and share the views set out by other speakers here this morning.

I do wish to emphasize that I think we have to start somewhere. In our view, the optimum place to start is with the duration of First Committee sessions. Certainly, we do not believe that the First Committee needs five weeks to do its work — let alone the six weeks that were initially proposed. We believe, therefore, that at the minimum we should be able to decide now that we can reduce the duration of the First Committee's sessions. We, frankly, believe that the First Committee can accomplish the valuable work that it can do and must do in four weeks.

As I said, we have a paper on the side table here that contains some further reflections. And we look forward to any further discussions under your leadership, Sir, that might help us to move forward under this item.

The Chairman: I believe that we have heard very interesting suggestions on the rationalization of the work of the Committee. We should now reflect on those issues that have been put forward and come back tomorrow morning to hear further comments.

The meeting rose at 11.05 a.m.